

**THE THREE
BROTHERS.**

VOL. II.

BY
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Table of Contents

THE THREE BROTHERS.

CHAPTER I. PLAY.

CHAPTER II. WHAT CAME OF IT.

CHAPTER III. A PATRON OF ART.

CHAPTER IV. SUCCESS.

CHAPTER V. A DISCOVERY.

CHAPTER VI. LAURIE'S FATE.

CHAPTER VII. A FULL STOP.

CHAPTER VIII. YOUNG FRANK.

CHAPTER IX. NELLY RICH.

CHAPTER X. BROTHERLY ADVICE.

CHAPTER XI. THE MUSIC-ROOM.

CHAPTER XII. A PRISONER.

CHAPTER XIII. SUNDAY.

CHAPTER XIV. FRANK'S PERPLEXITIES.

CHAPTER XV. PROGRESS.

CHAPTER XVI. MRS. RENTON'S CALL.

CHAPTER XVII. A STEP THE WRONG WAY.

CHAPTER XVIII. WAVERING.

THE THREE BROTHERS.

CHAPTER I.

PLAY.

IT must be admitted that the counsel thus bestowed upon Laurie in respect to his work had rather a discouraging than a stimulating effect upon him. It disgusted him, no doubt, with Edith and his big canvas, but it did not fill him, as it was intended to do, with enthusiasm for Clipstone Street, and his other opportunities of legitimate work. He made it an excuse for doing nothing, which was unfortunate, after so much trouble had been taken about him. Perhaps, on the whole, it would have been better to have let him have his way. The padrona herself thought so, though she had not been able to refrain from interfering when she had the opportunity. The Square, and the adjacent regions, had pronounced almost unanimously that the sketch was a very clever sketch; but, notwithstanding, deprecated with one voice the big canvas, and the ambitious work. 'I did it, and you see I have not made much of it,' said Suffolk. 'If I thought I could make as much of it as you have done, I should go in for it to-morrow,' cried Laurie, with an enthusiasm for which the painter's wife could have hugged him. 'But, dear Mr. Renton, if you would but advise him to take simpler subjects!' Mrs. Suffolk said, with her pathetic voice. Suffolk was a man of genius, as even old Welby admitted, and slowly, by degrees, the profession itself was beginning to be awake to his merits; but as for the British public, it knew nothing of the painter, except that up to this moment he had been hung down on the floor, or up at the roof, in the Academy's exhibition, and sneered at in the 'Sword.' This was what came of high art.

Mr. Welby paid Laurie a visit in his rooms, to enforce the lesson upon him. 'If we had room and space for that sort of thing, it would be all very well, sir,' said the R.A., 'but in a private collection what can you do with it? The best thing Suffolk could hope for would be to have his picture hung in some Manchester man's dining-room;—best patrons we have now-a-days. But it would fill up the whole wall, and naturally the Manchester man would rather have two or three Maclises, and a Mulready, and a Webster, and even a Welby, my dear fellow,—not to speak of Millais, and the young ones. There's how it is. A dozen pictures are better than one in our patrons' eyes,—more use, and more variety, and by far more valuable if anything should happen to the mills. Though it's a work of genius, Renton,—I don't deny it's a work of genius,—whereas this——'

'Is nothing but a beginner's attempt, I know,' said poor Laurie. 'That is all settled and understood. Let us talk of something else.'

Mr. Welby, without heeding the young man, got up, and gazed upon the white canvas, which still stood on the easel like a ghost, with the white outlines growing fainter. Laurie had not had the heart to touch it since that evening in the Square. 'I don't understand how you young men can be so rash,' he said; 'for my part, I think there is no picture that ever was painted equal to the sublimity of that blank canvas. Why, sir, it might be anything! Buonarotti or Leonardo never equalled what it might be. It is a thing that strikes me with awe; I feel like a wretch when I put the first daub of vulgar colour on it. Colour brings it down to reality,—to our feeble efforts after expression,—but in itself it is the inexpressible. I don't mind your chalk so much. It's a desecration, but not sacrilege,—a white shadow on the white blank,—and it might turn out anything, sir! Whereas, if you put another touch on

it, you would bring it down to your own level. The wonder to me always is how a man who is a true painter ever paints a line!’

‘It is well for the world that you have not always been of that opinion,’ said Laurie, forcing out a little compliment in spite of himself.

‘But I have always been of that opinion,’ said Mr. Welby. ‘Unfortunately, man is a complex being, my dear fellow, and whatever your convictions and higher sentiments may be, the other part of you will force itself into expression. But the thing is to keep it down as long as possible, and subdue and train it like any other slave. That is always my advice to you young men. Never draw two lines when you can do with one. Don’t spoil an inch more of that lovely white canvas than your idea will fill. Keep within your idea, my dear Laurie. You should no more tell it all out than a woman should tell out how fond she is of you. Art is coy, and loves a secret,’ said the old man, warming into a kind of enthusiasm.

These were the kind of addresses which were made to Laurie in this his first attempt to stumble out of his pleasant amateur ways into professional work and its habits. He could not but ask himself, with a tragi-comic wonder, whether it was anxiety for his good alone which wound up his friends into eloquence, or whether there had ever been a novice so overwhelmed by good advice before. He had done what he liked in the old days, when what he liked was of little consequence; but it was clear that he was not to be permitted to do what he liked now. He was affronted, disgusted, amused, and discouraged, all in a breath. Work in cold blood for work’s sake, to lead to no immediate end, was something of which Laurie was incapable. It seemed to him that the way to become a painter was

by painting pictures, and he did not give the weight they deserved to his friends' counsels when they adjured him to work at smaller matters, and to postpone the great. 'I shall never satisfy them,' he said to himself; and accordingly the spur being thus removed, his natural habit of mind returned upon him. He had no tendency to extravagance, being simple in all his tastes, and it seemed to him that he could get on very well on his two hundred a-year. 'I shall never marry,' Laurie said to himself, with a sigh, 'nor think of marrying. That sort of thing is all over; and there is enough to keep me alive, I suppose. And why should I go worrying everybody about pictures which I don't suppose I am fit to paint? But I may be of use to my friends,' he added in his self-communion. So he took to play instead of work, which he found to be more congenial to his ancient habits, and he fell back into it as naturally as possible. It would have been better for him, so far as his profession was concerned, had they let him have his own way.

But if he could not be a great painter himself, it was possible enough that he might be of use to those who were so. Though he had been momentarily absorbed by his abortive project, and momentarily thrown off his balance by all the opposition it met, yet he had not forgotten his promise to Mrs. Suffolk. If there was anything he could do to open the eyes of the British public, and show it what a blunder it was making, that would always be so much rescued from the blank of existence. Laurie's Edith, even had she come to the first development which he once hoped for her, could never be,—or at least it was not probable that she would ever be,—equal to that scene in the Forum, which hung neglected on the wall of Suffolk's studio. To bring the one into the light of day was perhaps a better work than to paint the other. It was the first thought that roused Laurie out of his own mortification. He bore no

malice. He was too sweet-hearted, too easy and forgiving, for that. Indeed, on the contrary, he was very grateful to one at least of his hardest critics. The padrona had uncovered her heart to him by way of pointing her objection. He had seen into her mind and spirit as perhaps no one else had ever done. He was sorry for the pain it must have given her to speak to him,—even more sorry than for himself; but Laurie could not, though Mrs. Severn would have wondered, speak what people call ‘a good word’ on her behalf when he got Slasher in his power. The words would have choked him. Ask any man in ordinary Art-jargon and common print to applaud the woman to whom his own heart began to give a kind of wordless, half-unconscious worship! Ask for praise, public praise, for his padrona. He would as soon have thought of leading her upon the stage to have garlands thrown at her feet like a prima donna. Here was a disability of woman which nobody had ever thought of before. It did not matter much, from Laurie’s point of view, whether they blamed her or praised her. To name her at all was a presumption unpardonable, the mere thought of which made his cheek burn. And yet it would have done Mrs. Severn a great deal of good had the ‘Sword’ taken an enthusiasm for her. And Laurie had no objection to her work. He knew that he could not have done it for her had he tried his hardest. Her independence, and her labours, and her artist life, were all part of herself. He could not realise her otherwise. But to have her talked of in the papers! Laurie’s private feeling was, that instead of influencing Slasher in her favour, he would like to knock down the fellow who should dare to have the presumption to think that she could be the better for his praise!

But Suffolk was a totally different matter. And Laurie, having turned his back upon the studio, and turned himself loose, so to

speak, upon the world again, set to work at the club and elsewhere, to cultivate Slasher with devotion. Slasher was understood to be the special art-critic of the 'Sword;' and he had qualified himself for such a post, as most men do, by an unsuccessful beginning as a painter, which had, however, happened so long ago that some people had forgotten, and some even were not aware of the fact. Though he was not ill-natured, it must be admitted that Laurie commended himself to the critic by the want of success which the young fellow did not attempt to disguise. 'My friends are a great deal too good to me,' Laurie said, with comic simpleness; 'they have all fallen upon my picture so, that I have given it up. What is the use of trying to paint with every man's opinion against you? I have not stuff enough in me for that!'

'Poor Laurie!' Slasher said, with a laugh which was not unkind. 'If you had persevered, probably I, too, should have been compelled, in the interests of art, to let loose my opinion. So it is as well for me you stopped in time.'

'But I want you to let loose your opinion, and do a service to the nation,' said Laurie. 'I want you to come to my place and meet a friend of mine,—the cleverest fellow I know. All he wants is, that you should speak a good word for him in the "Sword."'

'Ah!' said the critic, with a groan of disgust; 'I am tired of speaking good words. I don't mind walking into anybody to do you a favour, my dear fellow. There's always some justice in anything you like to say against a picture,—or a man either. But if you knew the sickening stuff one has to pour forth for one's own friends, or one's editor's friends! I am never asked to give a good notice in the 'Sword' but I feel that it's for an ass. Instinct, Laurie! I dare say your friend is everything that's delightful, but if his pictures

were worth twopence you would never come to me for a good word.'

'I should not ask you to praise him, certainly, if I did not think he deserved it,' said Laurie, with a little offence.

'Ah! if you were as well used to that sort of thing as I am,' said Slasher, with a sigh. 'I don't mind cutting 'em all up in little pieces to please the public. A slashing article is the easiest writing going. You have only to seize upon a man's weak point,—and every man has a weak point,—and go at it without fear or favour; but when Crowther comes and lays his hand on my shoulder in his confounded condescending way, "My dear fellow," he says, "here's a poor devil who is always pestering me. He is a cousin of my wife's;" or, "He's a friend of my brother-in-law's;" or, "He was at school with my boy," as the case may be. "I suppose his picture's as weak as water; but, hang it! say a good word for him. It may do him good, and it can't do us any harm." That's what I've got to do, till it makes me sick, I tell you. I'll pitch into your aversions, my dear Laurie, and welcome; but don't ask me to say good words for your friends.'

'But my friend is a man of genius,' said Laurie. 'I don't want you to speak up for him because he is my friend; but because his pictures are as fine as anything you ever saw.'

Slasher shook his head mournfully. 'I don't know anything about his pictures,' he said; 'but that's how criticism gets done now-a-days. A man speaks well of his friend, and ill of the fellows he don't like. And, as for justice, you know, and appreciation of merit, and so forth,—except, perhaps, once in a way, in the case of a new name, that nobody knows,—you might as well look for

snow in July. And it's just the same in literature. I said to Crowther the other day: "That's a nice book, I suppose, as you praised it so." "No," he says, "it's not a very nice book; but the man that wrote it is a nice fellow, which comes to the same thing." No, Laurie, my boy, I'm sick of praising people that don't deserve it. That's why I go in for cynicism and abuse, and all that. It may be hard upon a poor fellow now and then, but at all events, it isn't d——d lies.'

'I don't want you to tell lies,' said Laurie, half-affronted, half laughing. 'Come with me on Thursday to the Hydrographic. It's Suffolk's night for exhibition, and you shall see him, and see his work——'

'Suffolk!' said Slasher. 'That fellow! By Jove! I like your modesty, Laurie Renton, to come here calmly and ask me to praise a man's pictures whom I have cut up a score of times at least.'

'But I don't suppose you ever saw them', said Laurie, standing his ground.

'I've seen them as well as anybody could see them', said Slasher. 'I remember there was one in the North Room down on the floor one year, and one over the doorway. My dear fellow, I've seen the kind of thing,—that's enough. Heroic figures, with big bones, and queer garments—red hair, that never was combed in its life—and big blue saucer eyes, glaring out of the canvas. I know;—there are two or three fellows that do that sort of thing. But it will never take, you may be sure. The British public likes respectable young women with their clothes put properly on them; in nice velvet and satin, that they can guess at how much it cost a yard.'

‘The British public ought to be ashamed of itself,’ said Laurie; ‘but you may come with me on Thursday all the same.’

‘I don’t mind if I do for once,’ said the critic. And so the matter was settled. Laurie was a very busy man until Thursday came. He was as busy as he had been when his mind was full of Edith, but, on the whole, in a more agreeable way. After all, to shut yourself up all day long in a first floor in Charlotte Street, with a terrible litter about you,—for when there is nobody to keep you neat but a maid-of-all-work, and you have no time for ‘tidying’ yourself, litter is the inevitable consequence,—your windows shut up, and the light coming in over your head, as in a prison, is not a seductive occupation. Now that Edith was pushed aside out of the way and the windows were open, the room was more bearable. And why a man should make himself wretched by pursuing high art in direct opposition to all his friends? But Laurie betook himself, without entering into any explanations, to Suffolk’s house, and devoted himself to the task of collecting together his friend’s loose drawings. They had grown intimate by their frequent meetings in the Square. And Suffolk, who was in danger, as his wife feared, of getting ‘sour,’ and who was busy, and did not care to exhibit himself at the Hydrographic, gave in to Laurie with a half-sullen acquiescence. ‘What’s the good?’ he said. ‘But, Reginald dear, it may be a great deal of good,’ his wife said, turning wistful eyes upon him. And Laurie went and came, bringing his spick-and-span new portfolios to receive the drawings, which were huddled up in all sorts of dusty, battered, travel-worn receptacles. In such matters amateurs are safe to have the advantage over the brethren in the profession. He mounted, and trimmed, and arranged all day long, with his mouth full of dust, and his heart full of hope; and confided his anticipations to the

padrona in the evening, having established a right to the *entrée* at that moment of moments which she spent with her children over the fire. It came to look natural that Laurie should take his place on the hearth, in the firelight, along with little Frank and Harry. ‘A curious taste,’ the padrona said, and laughed; but not without a little wonder rising in her mind as to how this fancy was to be accounted for. ‘The boy likes to feel as if he were one of the family, I suppose,’ she said to Miss Hadley, who looked on sometimes, with her knitting, and did not approve;—‘for he is only a boy.’

‘He is boy enough to be fond of women a dozen years older than himself,’ said Miss Hadley, with a significant nod. To which Mrs. Severn, with her eyes fixed on the fire, made no immediate reply.

‘After all, it is quite natural,’ the padrona continued, after a pause; ‘he is separated from his own family by this strange business;—and such an affectionate, soft-hearted fellow!’

‘Well, I think it is chiefly affectionateness,’ Miss Hadley admitted: and she added after a moment: ‘It cannot be for Alice, as I thought!’

‘The child!’ cried Mrs. Severn, in alarm. ‘She is but a child. Don’t talk as if it were possible any one should dream of stealing her from me. What should we do without Alice?’ cried the mother, with a sudden pang. ‘Jane, I hope you will not do anything to put such ideas in any one’s mind.’

‘Such ideas come of themselves,’ said Miss Hadley. ‘She will be sixteen in summer. She is of more use than many a woman of six-and-twenty. She must marry some time or other. Why, what else could you look for when you refused to bring her up to do

anything? A girl who has no fortune in this world must either marry, or work, or starve; and I don't know,' said the strong-minded woman, with energy, 'which is the worst.'

'Hush,' said the padrona, with a smile, 'infidel! and here is the child going to her music. Alice, come and look me in the face.'

'Have I been naughty, mamma?' said Alice, bending over her mother. For a moment the two looked into each other's eyes, with the perfect love, and trust, and understanding which belongs to that dearest of relationships. If it gave a pang to the heart of the woman looking on, who had no child, I cannot tell. The mother lifted her face, still warm with all the vigour, and softness, and beauty of life, and kissed the lovely, soft cheek, in its perfection of youth. 'It would be no wonder if any one loved her,' she said softly, when the child had disappeared into the soft darkness in the next room, her heart wrung with a premonitory pang of tender anguish. That was the night on which Laurie brought his brother Frank,—splendid young Guardsman, who had run up to town to endeavour to arrange the exchange he wanted into a regiment going to India,—to introduce him to his friends in the Square.

But on the Thursday he rushed in breathless for five minutes only in the gloaming, to keep the padrona *au courant* of affairs. 'We have placed the picture, and it shows splendidly!' he cried. 'The only thing I fear is that Suffolk will be sulky, and not show as well as the picture. Could not you send for him before he goes, and put him in a good humour? If he were out of temper it might spoil all.'

‘I will send for them,’ said the padrona, ‘and keep his wife with me till you come back. It is very good of you to take all this trouble. I wish you had a picture to show splendidly too.’

‘How inconsistent some people are,’ said Laurie. ‘After making an end of my poor picture! No, padrona, that is all over. Let us now be of some use to our friends.’

‘But it is not all over,’ said Mrs. Severn. And then she paused, seeing, perhaps, some signs of impatience in him. ‘Heaps of people can paint pictures,’ she said; ‘but it is not everybody who can serve their friends,—like this.’

‘If it but succeed it will be something gained,’ said Laurie, with a sigh of anxiety; ‘and you will think me, after all, not useless in the world?’ he went on, holding out his hand. Miss Hadley was looking on, with very sharp eyes; and she saw that the young man stood holding the padrona’s hand much longer than was necessary for the formality of leave-taking. ‘Slasher is to dine with me at the club,’ he continued. ‘He will be in good humour at least. And you will think of us, and wish us good speed.’

‘Surely,’ the padrona said, withdrawing her hand; and Miss Hadley sat glancing out of the darkness with her keen eyes; knitting for ever, and looking on. When the young man was gone a certain embarrassment stole over Mrs. Severn,—she could not tell why. ‘He is as eager and excited as if his own fate were to be decided to-night,’ she said. ‘What a good fellow he is!’ Miss Hadley made no reply. No sound but that of the knitting-needles clicking against each other with a certain fierceness came out of the twilight in the corner. In this silence there was a certain disapproval, which made the padrona uncomfortable in spite of

herself. 'I am afraid you have changed your opinion of poor Laurie,' she said, after a pause. 'I thought you used to like him?' The children had not yet come down from their game of romps in the nursery up-stairs, and the two were alone.

'I like him very well,' said Miss Hadley. 'I like him so well that I can't bear to see him making a fool of himself.'

'How is he making a fool of himself?' said Mrs. Severn, quickly.

'Or to see other people making a fool of him,' said Miss Hadley. 'There, I have said my say! I don't know if it be his fault or yours; but the young fellow is losing his head, my dear, and you must see it as well as I do.'

'I see nothing of the kind,' said the padrona, with dignity. 'I am surely old enough to be safe from such nonsense; and you are too old to talk like a school-girl. You are as jealous as a man,' she added, after a pause, relapsing into easier tones. 'Would you like me to forbid the poor boy the house?'

'It might be best,' said Miss Hadley, stiffly;—'certainly for him. I don't know about you.'

'What folly!' cried the padrona, with momentary anger; but the children rushed in at the moment, sweeping away all other thoughts. Mrs. Severn, however, was more silent than usual as she sat in the firelight with Edie's soft arms clasped round her neck. She told but one story all the evening, and that an old one. Her mind was pre-occupied. The governess sitting in the corner grew bitter as she gazed at her. 'A woman with every blessing of life,—a woman with all those children,' Miss Hadley said to herself; 'yet a

young man's silly love is enough to draw her mind away from them,—at her age! What fools we are!' Thus another little drama sprang into life in a corner, with actors, and accessories, and spectators, all complete. There was Alice in the great dim drawing-room, as usual, playing softly, till the very air seemed to dream and murmur with the wistfulness of her music. 'This romance should have come to the child,' Miss Hadley mused, with anger; 'with the child it would have been natural. With the mother——' She could not trust herself to realise what she thought about the mother. She had held so different an opinion of her at all former times; the padrona had shown herself so entirely unmoved by such vanities! And now, good heavens, at her age! Such were Miss Hadley's thoughts as she sat in the twilight, while her friend played with her children. She forgot her sister, who was waiting for her, and all the comforts of the little parlour in Charlotte Street. She would have liked to stay there all night, to keep at her post without intermission, to save the padrona from herself. 'She cannot realise what she is doing,' Miss Hadley said in her self-communion. And probably Mrs. Severn was aware of her friend's inquisition. She had a little flush on her cheeks when she received the Suffolks, for whom she had sent. She went into all the arrangements of the Hydrographic for that evening with an interest which was a little nervous and overstrained. 'I trust some illustrious stranger may be there to be of use to you,' she said, with a smile; and took no notice of Miss Hadley, who kept immovably in the background. And when Suffolk, in his best humour and his evening coat, went out to the Hydrographic, where his pictures were being exhibited, the two women, whom he left behind, talked a great deal about Laurie. Poor Laurie! He was very happy, and excited, and in earnest at that moment, believing himself in the fair way of serving his friend. And they both liked him with tenderness, such as

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